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TAGS: KDEM PGOV PREL ET
SUBJECT: MAKING A POINT ON DEMOCRACY IN ETHIOPIA

REF: ADDIS 677

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S/NF) During a series of meetings with Ethiopia's senior leadership, the Ambassador stressed the importance of inter-party talks between the opposition and ruling parties, and the critical necessity for the ruling party and government entities to investigate transparently and expeditiously any and all charges of election problems from harassment to inability to register candidates. The Ambassador and Embassy staff have made these points consistently, but particularly in the past week with Prime Minister Meles, Foreign Minister Seyoum, State Minister Dr. Tekeda, ruling party stalwart in charge of the 2010 national elections Minister Bereket and the National Electoral Board (NEB) leadership. The U.S. Embassy chairs the Ambassadors and Donors group and has made the 2010 elections one of the key priorities for coordination and advocacy. The senior Ethiopian leadership has criticized foreign diplomats for not being neutral and pressing the opposition agenda. While we have stressed the importance of the 2010 national elections, it is clear that we will need more dialogue and better coordination within the U.S. interagency process and with our European and Asian donor colleagues to press the interests we all share in conducting open and transparent elections. End Summary.

MAKING A POINT

¶2. (S/NF) The U.S. Embassy has taken the lead in advocating for transparent and open national elections in 2010 which build on the 2005 national elections. 2005 saw the opposition take 170 seats in the 547 seat national parliament, a dramatic increase over the 15 seats they held for the previous decade. Since 2005, the government has enacted laws which limit and restrict party politics, the media, and civil society. While the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition can overcome the barriers, the fragmented and under-funded opposition parties have found their operations restricted. Laws have been passed regulating political financing, access to the press, and ability of civil society organizations (NGOs) to receive funding from foreign sources and participate in the political process. The April 2008 local elections saw the ruling party take over all but three of over three million seats. While many opposition parties boycotted the local elections due to incomplete implementation of the electoral law, their inability to field

and register candidates, difficulties in gaining access to press coverage and finances, and local law enforcement officials failing to investigate the opposition's charges of harassment make efforts to correct these problems and push forward for a more open electoral process in 2010 ever more critical.

¶13. (S/NF) In this context the U.S. Embassy has advocated for two essential conditions to which the ruling party and national government has agreed but never implemented.

Interparty talks between the opposition and ruling parties have been the pillar of our discussions with the government since the 2005 elections and the violent aftermath which left 193 dead. Such talks have yet to take place but the NEB says a session is being planned for June. While the ruling party has met with some opposition parties, we have stressed that all credible parties, not just selected parties viewed as cooperative, must meet. A second condition that we have called for is the commitment by the government to investigate any and all charges of harassment and general problems faced by any prospective candidate or political party. We have stressed the importance of this condition to give confidence to the opposition parties to participate and not boycott the 2010 elections.

¶14. (S/NF) Ambassador spoke separately with Prime Minister Meles and Foreign Minister Seyoum on this topic on May 22, and at greater length with ruling party coordinator for the elections, Communications Minister Bereket Simon, on May 25, and National Elections Board chiefs Dr. Merga Bekana and Dr. Addisu Gebreizabher on May 21. Embassy staff also raised

ADDIS ABAB 00001280 002 OF 002

these issues with MFA State Minister Dr. Tekeda Alemu and his staff at a private luncheon with U.S. Embassy staff on May 29. In all these recent meetings, the intent of the U.S. Embassy has been to focus the government and ruling party, in private discussions, on the importance of preparing for the 2010 elections and building on positive elements in the 2005 elections. While our discussions with the government leadership have been positive and cordial, it is clear that the ruling party will make every effort to make the electoral process favor the ruling party. It is not clear that they truly accept either of the conditions noted above.

¶15. (S/NF) The American Embassy holds the Chair for the Ambassadors and donors group. With the push by the U.S. side, the 2010 elections is one of the top priorities for these two groups. USAID is cobbling together funding for international observers. The European countries have not allocated funding and may not send observers. The African Union hopes to send observers, but the government of Ethiopia needs to request observers. The U.S. Embassy has strongly recommended the importance of observers.

THE OPPOSITION

¶16. (S/NF) Since 2005, the parliament has passed a series of laws which regulate and make it difficult for political parties to operate. It is easier for the ruling party to collect finances through its main economic support organization, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT, reftel), a conglomerate of businesses which raises funds for the party. Conversely, the opposition does not have in place such a structured financial support element and recent laws bar political parties from receiving contributions from businesses. Further, the opposition is highly fragmented, despite the December 29 re-arrest of Birtukan Midekssa, who leads one of the largest opposition parties. The opposition parties are making an effort to coordinate through the formation of the "Forum for Democratic Dialogue" to develop a common position on Ethiopia's political future. Ethnic divisions and personal rivalries are making the unity of the opposition parties difficult. The U.S. Embassy meets regularly with Forum members and plans

to meet the Forum during one of its meetings.

GOVERNMENT CRITICISM

¶7. (S/NF) Prime Minister Meles has been firm in explaining to the Ambassador that the government feels that foreign missions are pro-opposition and not neutral on domestic politics of Ethiopia. The Prime Minister stressed that the opposition cannot complain to foreign embassies to secure better conditions for the electoral process. All parties must submit to the same regulations and there can be no favoritism or added advantage that provides opposition parties with better treatment than the ruling party.

FINAL NOTE

¶8. (S/NF) After the ruling party lost Addis Ababa's city hall to the opposition in 2005 (though the opposition refused to take its seats), it has systematically focused on reversing the inroads made by the opposition in time for the 2010 elections. While both opposition and ruling parties have agreed that the two conditions laid out by the U.S. Embassy are appropriate, we will need better coordination within the Washington interagency process and closer cooperation from European and Asian donors in effectively advocating for the ruling party and government to observe and implement interparty dialogue and investigation of any problems leading up to the 2010 elections. It is in the interests of both of our countries for the conduct of transparent and open elections to minimize the growing frustration by the electorate and to avoid boycotts by the opposition parties.

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